



Strategic Research La recherche stratégique

Aboriginal Women

EDUCATION AND MAJOR FIELDS OF STUDY

Key Findings:

- Thirty-six percent of Aboriginal women have a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree, compared to 50% of non-Aboriginal women.
- The proportion of Aboriginal women holding a university degree has increased steadily since 2001.
- Among Aboriginal women, Métis and Registered Indian women living off reserve are the most highly educated.

Introduction

Education is one of the most important determinants of economic, health and social well-being. Higher education leads to better quality and higher paying jobs and reduced unemployment, all of which impacts health outcomes. This is as true for Aboriginal women as for any other group in Canada.

The Strategic Research Directorate, in partnership with the Gender Issues Directorate, commissioned a study on Aboriginal women in Canada using the 2006 Census of Population. This Strategic Research Brief focuses on educational characteristics of Aboriginal women, while making comparisons to non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men.

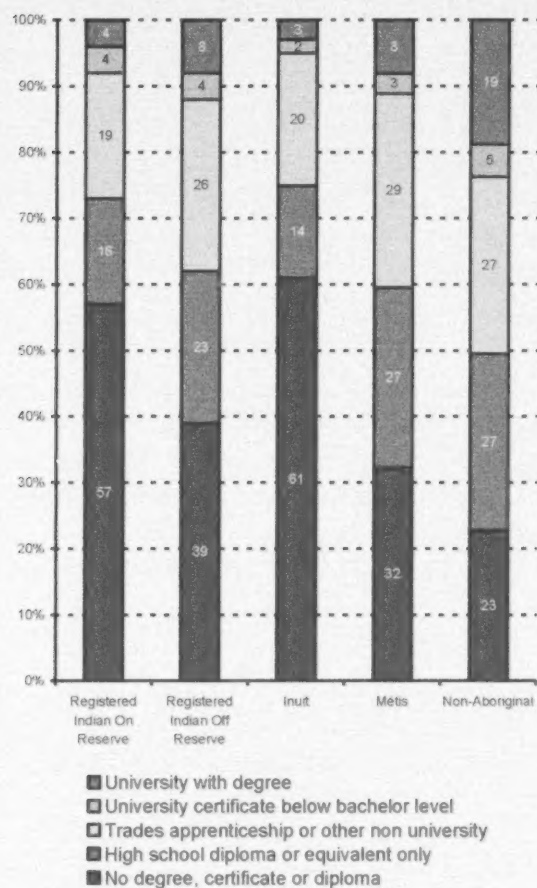
Main Findings

Comparing educational attainment

Figure 1 presents the highest certificate, diploma or degree earned by on- and off-reserve Registered Indian, Inuit, Métis and non-Aboriginal women. It shows that, in 2006, 36% of all Aboriginal women have a postsecondary certificate or degree. This is noticeably lower than the non-Aboriginal female population, 57% of which have a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree. The difference in postsecondary attainment is mainly explained by the much smaller percentage of Aboriginal women with a university degree: 19% of non-Aboriginal females have a degree, compared to only 7% of Aboriginal women.

Although Aboriginal women have lower educational attainment than non-Aboriginal women, research shows that at least some of this difference is due to their diverging pathways through the education system. For example, while many Aboriginal women do not have a high school diploma, some of these women return to complete high school later in life, starting in their twenties. Delayed pathways in education are also suggested by the fact that many Aboriginal postsecondary students are older and more likely to have children when compared to other students (Holmes, D. 2005).

Figure 1: Highest earned certificate, diploma or degree for Women by Identity and Place of Residence, Canada, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of the Population, 2006, AANDC Tabulations

The educational diversity found among Aboriginal groups is also highlighted in Figure 1. Registered Indian women living off reserve (23%) are much more likely than those living on reserve (16%) to have completed high school, a trades or apprenticeship program (26% compared to 19%) or a university degree (8% compared to 4%). In total, 38% of Registered Indian women living off reserve have some type of postsecondary education. Only 26% of Registered Indian women living on reserve have the same level of education.

Métis women have post-secondary completion levels (68%) closer to those of non-Aboriginal women (77%). However, only 39% of Inuit women have completed post-secondary education. Among all Aboriginal groups, Métis women show the highest and Inuit women the lowest rates of formal educational attainment.

Major fields of study

Table 1 presents the major fields of study for the highest level of education among women with postsecondary education. It excludes those who were attending school full-time during 2005-2006, because they had not completed their formal schooling.

Interestingly, the four most predominant fields of study are the same for all Canadian women. Given that many of these fields lead to traditional female occupations, this suggests that gender is a stronger determinant of field of study than is Aboriginal identity. However, it is worth stressing that a broad field of study is not the same as job type: for example, while dental hygiene and medical doctor programs fall under the same broad field of study, there is a vast difference in the employment conditions of these two professions.

Regardless of group, Aboriginal women are most likely to have completed programs in business, management and public relations; health, parks, recreation and fitness; social and behavioural sciences and law; and, education. These top four fields of study are ranked in exactly the same order for all groups but Inuit women.

There are a few noteworthy differences among Aboriginal women. The field of health, parks, recreation, and fitness exhibits the greatest variability among the different Aboriginal groups. For example, while 25% of Métis women completed a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree in this field, 13% of Inuit women did so in the same area.

Geographic variations in educational attainment

This study highlights how educational attainment levels vary among Aboriginal women according to group and place of residence. With regard to group, in 2006 Inuit women (28%) and Registered Indian women on reserve (43%) reported lower levels of post secondary educational attainment as compared to non-Aboriginal women (77%), Métis (68%), or Registered Indian women living off-reserve (61%).

Place of residence shows the most striking difference in educational attainment among

Registered Indian women. While 57% of Registered Indian women living on reserve had no degree or diploma in 2006, this percentage dropped to 39% among those living off reserve. However, only 4% of Registered Indian women living on-reserve hold a university degree, compared to 8% living off-reserve.

In general, non-Aboriginal women have higher levels of educational attainment compared to Aboriginal women. However, the proportion of Aboriginal women holding a university degree has increased steadily since 2001. It now ranges from 3% among Inuit women to 8% among off-reserve Registered Indian women.

Table 1: Major Field of Study of Women with Post Secondary Education by Identity and Place of Residence, Canada, 2006

Aboriginal Identity		Reg. Indian, on reserve	Reg. Indian, off reserve	Inuit	Métis	Non- Aboriginal
Major field of study	Personal, protective and transportation services	7%	9%	8%	10%	6%
	Health, parks and recreation and fitness	18%	22%	13%	25%	21%
	Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%
	Architecture, engineering and related technologies	4%	3%	4%	4%	3%
	Mathematics, computer and information sciences	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%
	Physical and life sciences and technologies	0.4%	1%	1%	2%	3%
	Business, management and public administration	30%	30%	31%	29%	27%
	Social sciences and behavioral sciences and law	15%	13%	16%	11%	13%
	Humanities	5%	4%	5%	4%	7%
	Visual/performing arts and communication technologies	1%	3%	4%	3%	4%
	Education	15%	9%	14%	9%	11%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of the Population, 2006, AANDC Tabulations <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/ref/dict/pop064-eng.cfm>

Conclusions

While many First Nations women do not complete high school in their teens, some return to school later in life. This underscores the fact that Aboriginal women tend to follow different pathways in completing postsecondary education as compared to non-Aboriginal women.

The highest proportion of Aboriginal women was found in the fields of business, management and public administration as well as health, parks, recreation and fitness. Very few Aboriginal women have qualifications in physical and life sciences or agriculture and natural resources. The distribution is similar among women in the various Aboriginal identity groups. Registered Indian women on reserves and Inuit women tend to be more engaged in the field of education.

Finally, Aboriginal women as a whole appear to choose very similar fields of study as do non-Aboriginal women. This implies that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women are influenced by similar societal expectations with respect to such traditional gender roles as teaching, nursing and business.

Educational attainment and the Canadian Census

Starting in 2006, the Census measures educational attainment based on the "highest certificate, diploma or degree" earned. This is a significant change from previous Censuses, which reported on "highest level of schooling." This new approach demands some caution in interpreting findings. It represents a simplification of a more complex reality, and it assumes a linear, hierarchical model of education. For example, many people attended post-secondary programs, but the Census only captures their highest completed certification.

About the researcher and Strategic Research Directorate

This Strategic Research Brief is based on a study conducted by Jacqueline M. Quinless, entitled "Aboriginal Women in Canada: A Statistical Profile from the 2006 Census". This study is available at the Departmental Library.

Quinless is a private consultant with 15 years of applied research experience in the analysis of socio-economic and demographic data. She has worked extensively within the Aboriginal community across western and northern Canada.

The Strategic Research Directorate is mandated to support the federal government's policy-making regarding First Nations, Métis, Inuit and northern peoples in Canada. It does this through a program of survey development, policy research and knowledge transfer.

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The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.